

**MINUTES  
of the  
FIRST MEETING  
of the  
MILITARY AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

**June 5, 2019  
State Capitol, Room 307  
Santa Fe**

The first meeting of the Military and Veterans' Affairs Committee (MVAC) was called to order by Representative Harry Garcia, co-chair, on June 5, 2019 at 10:06 a.m. in Room 307 of the State Capitol in Santa Fe.

**Present**

Rep. Harry Garcia, Co-Chair  
Sen. Bill Tallman, Co-Chair  
Rep. Rachel A. Black  
Sen. Craig W. Brandt  
Sen. William F. Burt  
Rep. Rodolpho "Rudy" S. Martinez  
Sen. Michael Padilla  
Rep. Debra M. Sariñana

**Absent**

**Advisory Members**

Rep. Eliseo Lee Alcon  
Sen. Carlos R. Cisneros  
Sen. Richard C. Martinez

Rep. Cathrynn N. Brown  
Rep. Randal S. Crowder  
Rep. Joy Garratt  
Sen. William H. Payne  
Rep. Jane E. Powdrell-Culbert  
Rep. G. Andrés Romero

**Guest Legislator**

Sen. Nancy Rodriguez

**Staff**

Jeret Fleetwood, Researcher, Legislative Council Service (LCS)  
Erin Bond, Research Assistant, LCS  
Sara Wiedmaier, Research Assistant, LCS

**Guests**

The guest list is in the meeting file.

**Handouts**

Copies of all handouts are in the meeting file.

**Wednesday, June 5**

**Recognition and Introductions**

The committee held a moment of silence recognizing the passing of Senator John Pinto, who served as a Navajo code talker and who was a member of the MVAC.

Committee members and staff introduced themselves.

**Veterans' Services Department (VSD) Overview**

Brigadier General Judy Griego, secretary, VSD, introduced herself and informed the committee that she served in the military for 36 years, including 12 years in the enlisted ranks. She then introduced Edward Mendez, director, Benefits and Services, VSD, and David Walker, bureau chief, Cemeteries and Memorials, VSD.

Secretary Griego stated that the VSD's motto is "Serving Those Who Served". To that end, the VSD's mission is to provide the highest quality care, service and advocacy for the men and women who have served as members of the United States Armed Forces and their families. Secretary Griego noted that veterans are an aging population, so the VSD must anticipate and serve their needs. The VSD aims to serve urban, rural and tribal partners and to sustain a high-performance customer service workforce.

Secretary Griego explained that approximately 80 percent of the staff of the VSD are veterans; most of the remaining 20 percent are related to a veteran or service member. Of the 63 authorized full-time employee positions, 54 are currently occupied. Both employment numbers are expected to change due to the transfer of the New Mexico State Veterans' Home back to the Department of Health (DOH) and the development of veterans' cemeteries across the state.

The VSD is composed of the Administrative Services Division, the State Benefits Division, the Field Services Division, the Health Care Coordination Division and the Veterans Business Outreach Center. Secretary Griego stated that recent milestones for the VSD include the transfer of the New Mexico State Veterans' Home back to the DOH; the establishment of the Transportation for Veterans Task Force; and the grand opening of a veterans' cemetery in Gallup.

Mr. Mendez explained to the committee that there are many benefits available to veterans in New Mexico, such as tax exemptions, free passes to state monuments and museums and reduced-fee hunting and fishing licenses. Memorials and cemeteries are important to the VSD, he said, as they allow the families of veterans to visit gravesites without traveling long distances. State veterans' cemeteries can be found in Fort Stanton and Gallup, with ongoing construction in Angel Fire. A state veterans' cemetery has been approved for United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) consideration for a construction grant project, and the VSD will coordinate with the VA to procure grant funding.

Mr. Mendez said that in the future, the VSD plans to staff and maintain all state veterans' cemeteries to the VA's National Cemetery Administration standards. The VSD will also support Taos County in its development of a veterans' cemetery.

Members of the committee expressed support for the Taos County Veterans Cemetery and appreciation for the work done by the county and local volunteers. However, it was noted that VA policy prohibits building a veterans' cemetery within a 75-mile radius of an existing veterans' cemetery. Thus, Taos County, as well as Bernalillo County, are considered too close to the Santa Fe National Cemetery. The VA chose Angel Fire instead, due to its distance from other cemeteries and the presence of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

The committee voted to send a letter from the committee to the New Mexico congressional delegation requesting that the delegation introduce legislation for a waiver for the Taos County Veterans Cemetery. The motion was adopted, with one committee member voting in the negative.

In response to questions from the committee, Mr. Mendez explained that there are approximately 158,000 veterans registered in New Mexico, as well as other unregistered veterans. He and Secretary Griego acknowledged the diverse needs of veterans, especially female, incarcerated and disabled veterans. Sixteen field officers provide outreach to rural and tribal areas, but the officers must close their offices to do so. The VSD currently has a 15 percent vacancy rate, but hiring is ongoing. Several positions are intentionally left vacant and will close once the transfer of the New Mexico State Veterans' Home is complete. The VSD also works closely with nongovernmental organizations to do outreach.

Secretary Griego explained to the committee that the VSD does not have the budget or knowledge to run the New Mexico State Veterans' Home. A committee member expressed concern that the veterans' home was not well run when the DOH previously had control, and the member hopes that the committee will exercise its oversight authority to ensure that the veterans are cared for.

### **Office of Military Base Planning and Support (OMBPS) Overview**

Greg Myers, director, OMBPS, Economic Development Department, explained that his position is designed to support the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Commission, inform the governor of issues affecting military bases in the state and act as liaison between community organizations and military bases.

Mr. Myers said that the BRAC Commission consists of the lieutenant governor and representatives from 11 counties. The commission obtains and evaluates information about the federal government's plans for military bases and advises the governor and New Mexico's congressional delegation on continuing the presence of military bases. However, the United States Department of Defense (DOD) and other federal agencies will continue their actions with

or without involvement from the commission. New Mexico and its communities must address military value and criteria now, he said.

Mr. Myers stated that, in the past, the DOD has used the availability of land and airspace, the cost of operations and factors impacting mission growth to evaluate realignment and closure opportunities. Encroachment, or incompatible development surrounding military installations that threatens a base's ability to carry out its mission, is also a major consideration. Encroachment in New Mexico includes renewable energy obstruction on military training routes, noise complaints and light pollution. Mr. Myers noted that there is no statewide permitting process that requires a military base's mission to be considered during community or private development. However, the OMBPS is working with the Mid-Region Council of Governments to seek a grant to study compatible siting of renewable energy projects in New Mexico.

Mr. Myers reminded the committee that New Mexico hosts four military bases, each looking to expand and work with local communities. The OMBPS will work to reestablish the BRAC Commission, understand the impacts of renewable energy on military planning and develop the OMBPS website. Possible legislation will include reciprocity licensure for military personnel and families and protection against encroachment.

A member of the committee noted that the commission has been inoperative for approximately two years and expressed concern that several members of the congressional delegation are new to office and unfamiliar with the needs and problems surrounding military installations.

### **2019 Session Legislation and Interim Work Plan and Meeting Schedule**

Mr. Fleetwood reviewed the committee's proposed work plan, meeting schedule and legislation from the previous session. Members suggested changes to the work plan, including adding discussion of health care available to veterans and rights veterans have if the VA cannot diagnose an ailment; reciprocity licensure; incentivizing retirement in New Mexico for veterans; a report from the Transportation for Veterans Task Force; and an update on veterans' cemeteries across the state. Suggested meeting locations included Gallup, Clovis and Ruidoso.

The committee adopted the proposed work plan and meeting schedule, with the changes proposed, without objection.

### **Adjournment**

There being no further business before the committee, the meeting adjourned at 1:04 p.m.